

SPECIAL TRIBUTE TO JESSICA SCHROEDER



A few years ago, the NCUST team was excited to hear about a couple of teachers in Salt Lake City who arranged a series of book study meetings focused on *Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools*. In December of 2019, I had the opportunity to travel to Salt Lake City to visit one of the book study sessions.

It was quickly apparent that the book study organizers, Jessica Schroeder and Elizabeth Holloway, were fabulous teachers. They organized the session in a way that engaged all of us in considering how we might apply the teaching practices in our everyday work. They created an environment that helped all the participants know that their ideas and perspectives were valuable. Jess and Liz were humble, yet powerful. They were both practical and inspirational. I was honored to have the opportunity to watch two master teachers engage their colleagues in developing deeper understandings of the teaching practices we had learned from outstanding teachers across the nation.

This week, I was saddened to learn that Jessica Schroeder passed away from an aggressive form of cancer. She was only 30 years old. Jess' principal, Daniel Aragon, explained that Jess "was a true educator: reflective in her thoughts, open to research-based practices, passionate about all students learning at high levels, and collaborative in working with her colleagues. We miss her dearly."

In describing Jess, Dr. Cori Groth from the University of Utah's Utah Education Policy Center explained, "Jess had a powerful influence as a teacher leader in the Salt Lake City School District. I've never seen a more engaging, high-quality classroom where lessons are intentionally designed with colleagues to support students' learning. Jess invited students to give input and share feedback about the lesson designs, she pushed their thinking, she laughed with them, she made them feel confident and competent about what they were learning, and she created an incredibly warm, inclusive classroom culture. She was also an amazing colleague—opening her classroom and sharing

ideas about teaching and leadership, including her passion for learning about what America's best urban schools were doing and thinking about the possibilities for the future."

Another leader at the Utah Education Policy Center, Dr. Janice Bradley, commented upon Jess' evolution as a teacher leader. She explained, "As Jess learned more about teacher leadership and honed her craft, she brought the same high expectations and inclusive perspectives for supporting adult learning. Personally and professionally, she gave me the gift and blessing of sharing her journey of transformation from teacher to teacher leader. By the time she graduated, she exemplified each of the Teacher Leader Standards at the highest levels. She fostered a collaborative culture for both her peers' and her students' learning, she constantly drew on research to improve her practice and student learning, and she valued and promoted professional learning...Prior to her passing, she was recognized at the state level for her mathematics leadership and expertise."



Elizabeth, Jess' friend and colleague, added "I learned so much from Jess, as a professional and as a global citizen. She was a force to be reckoned with. She taught me that I could be more, as a teacher and as a person. I could demand more from the systems that hold kids and families of color back (or "blow them up", to use her words) and she showed me how to make noise and make it count about the things that matter. She taught me that you should never stay silent about the things that matter to you, and she showed me what it looks like to clear the path for teachers to become their best, always, always, always for students and families. I am heartbroken to think that she and I can't keep lighting the world on fire, hand in hand, side by side, but I feel DEEPLY convicted by the fact that it will take all of us to keep her fire burning. I was lucky enough to have an hour with her last Friday, and I promised her that I would spend the rest of my life keeping her fire burning bright in our world and in the world of public education. I hope we can all work together to do just that."

One of the greatest joys of working with NCUST is the opportunity to meet incredible people who are changing children's lives and, by doing so, are changing the life of communities. Meeting Jess was a joy. She didn't need a fancy title to influence our work or to indirectly influence the lives of thousands

of children she would never meet. She just rolled up her sleeves, reached out her arms, and did what she was born to do.

-Dr. Joseph Johnson